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C O N F I D E N T I A L SAN SALVADOR 001398

SIPDIS

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TAGS: ES PGOV SCUL
SUBJECT: EVANGELICAL UNHAPPINESS WITH ARENA COULD IMPACT
ELECTION

Classified By: The Ambassador, for reasons 1.4 (b) and (d)

¶1. (U) Summary: President of the Salvadoran National Commission of Pastors and Leaders (CONAPAL), Romel Guardon, expressed his displeasure with President Elias Antonio "Tony" Saca and ARENA Presidential Candidate Rodrigo Avila December 2, but said that the group would wait until February to decide who it would back in the March 2009 presidential elections. With nearly 29 percent of the population identifying themselves as evangelicals, this is a group that no party can afford to lose. The division in the Salvadoran Catholic church between conservatives and those espousing liberation-theology style politics seems little changed from previous years. End summary.

EVANGELICALS UNHAPPY WITH ARENA

¶2. (U) President of the Salvadoran National Commission of Pastors and Leaders, Romel Guardon, who recently wrote a book on religion and politics in El Salvador, accused President Saca of failing to uphold his pledge to appoint an evangelical presidential commissioner and to promulgate reforms to facilitate recognition of evangelical churches. In public statements made during his book launching event, Guardon said that Rodrigo Avila had committed a &very grave error&, but would not identify the error, and said that the group would decide which candidate to back in February.

AN EVANGELICAL CANDIDATE?

¶3. (U) Despite evangelicals, unhappiness with Saca and (center-right, pro-U.S.) ARENA, Guardon acknowledged that it was unlikely that the group would support the left. Mario Vega, pastor of the ELIM church, which claims over 200,000 members, warned candidates in an op-ed piece in September that evangelicals were a diverse group and do not vote as a bloc. More ominously for ARENA, he said that the evangelical vote cannot be won by striking deals with church leaders. (Center-right) Party of National Conciliation (PCN) candidate Jose Tomas Chevez, a leading member of ELIM, is touting his religious credentials in his campaign, and has the potential to take at least some of the evangelical vote.

EVANGELICALS) A GROWING FORCE

¶4. (U) According to a recent survey by the Central American University Public Opinion Institute (IUDOP), nearly 29 percent of Salvadorans now identify themselves as evangelical Christians. Of that, the Pentecostals are the fastest growing religious sector in the country. The first Pentecostals arrived from the United States in the 1920s, missionaries from the Assemblies of God Church. The Assemblies of God, a Pentecostal group with membership over

200,000, is the largest non-Catholic denomination in El Salvador, nearly 18 percent of the population.

15. (U) While in the past evangelical churches were considered a passive, nonpolitical force, in recent elections the groups have proven to be increasingly active. Church leaders have always encouraged community service and civic involvement; now they encourage their congregations to be active citizens) which likely contributed to the unprecedented 63 percent voter turnout in 2004 compared to 36 percent in the 1999 elections. While some, including ELIM pastor Mario Vega, say that evangelicals did not tip the 2004 election to Saca, others disagree. Political analyst and former FMLN member Salvador Samayoa says that evangelical groups are very organized and obedient and the majority will follow church leaders.

DID EVANGELICALS SWING THE 2004 ELECTION?

16. (U) In the lead up to the 2004 presidential election, both major candidates, Elias Antonio "Tony" Saca and the (left-wing) FMLN candidate Schafik Handal, recognized the growing power of the evangelical movement and both worked to persuade the churches to vote in their favor. Saca, a Catholic, made numerous phone calls to evangelical pastors and agreed to appoint an evangelical presidential commissioner. Handal gave speeches connecting Christian values with the FMLN's social justice platform. Ultimately, Baptists, Lutherans, and Episcopalians leaned toward the FMLN, while Pentecostals, which includes the Assemblies of God, the Church of Apostles and Prophets, and Prince of

Peace, largely supported ARENA.

THE FRIENDS OF ISRAEL AND &BROTHER TOBY8

17. (U) Although most Baptist churches leaned toward the FMLN in the last presidential election, the Baptist Biblical Tabernacle of the Friends of Israel, an evangelical congregation that claimed more than 200,000 followers in 2005, endorsed ARENA for the 2004 election. The Friends of Israel is led by Edgar Lopez Bertrand, better known as &Brother Toby8, who was outspoken in his support of Saca during the campaign. After Saca's victory, "Brother Toby" delivered the invocation at the inauguration) the first time a Protestant minister participated in a Salvadoran presidential inauguration. (Note: A year later, Bertrand was arrested in Houston, and eventually pleaded guilty, for falsifying a birth certificate to obtain a U.S. passport. End note.)

18. (C) On August 18, Monsignor Fabio Colindres, Bishop for the Salvadoran Armed Forces, told Poloff that while there is still a significant number of priests in the Salvadoran Catholic church that subscribe to left-leaning, liberation-theology style politics, the majority of the Salvadoran church hierarchy is conservative. Although, he said that he would not underestimate the influence of left-leaning priests over their parishioners, the rest of the Catholic clergy also held sway over significant numbers of voters. While neither side would endorse a specific candidate or party, both sides could - and would - make those preferences clear without naming names. Nonetheless, Colindres said the political divisions inside the Catholic Church were not significantly changed in recent years, though there was a heightened sense of worry in the church hierarchy that the FMLN might win the March presidential election.

19. (SBU) Comment: Godless communism, or, for that matter, anything else, will not sell here, something even the Salvadoran Communist Party realized decades ago. While there seems to have been little shift in the split of the Catholic Church since 2004, the same cannot be said of Protestants. In a race where the FMLN continues to lead in the polls,

ARENA can ill afford to lose even a fraction of the evangelical vote because of unfulfilled campaign pledges and (unidentified) grave errors.

GLAZER